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SUBJECT: KEMEROVO OBLAST: KREMLIN LOYALTY IN SIBERIA

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Summary

¶1. (C) In the ten years he has been governor in Kemerovo, Aman-Geldy Tuleyev has garnered vast popular support and been among the most successful of provincial leaders in tacking with the prevailing political winds, delivering a near-Caucasus turnout to the ruling party. During meetings in the Kemerovo region February 13-15, interlocutors agreed almost unanimously that Tuleyev is a seasoned politician who has led the oblast with skill. Tuleyev came to power as a Communist under Yeltsin, but has survived by migrating to United Russia in 2005. He demonstrated his loyalty to the Kremlin in the December State Duma elections by delivering the vote for United Russia. Tuleyev has enhanced his public support and Kremlin backing by latching onto the national programs that are a national pedestal for presidential shoe-in Dmitriy Medvedev. Some observers in the region believe that Tuleyev's longevity as governor has been purchased at the expense of programs, like coal safety, that, recent accidents show, need to be addressed. End summary.

Overfulfilling the Plan

¶2. (U) Results from the December 2, 2007, Duma elections set Kemerovo apart from its neighbors in Siberia. Turnout on election day in Kemerovo was 77 percent, 14 percent higher than the national turnout and significantly higher than in other Siberian regions of Russia. Similarly, 77 percent of the vote cast in Kemerovo Oblast went to United Russia, about 12 percentage points higher than the national average and significantly higher than its neighbors in the region. Only seven percent of the local vote went to the Communist Party, 4 percent below the national average and significantly below the results in a region traditionally seen as a Communist stronghold. Although turnout and support for United Russia did not reach Caucasus-level proportions (reftel), the significant deviation from surrounding regions raised questions about possible election fraud or falsification.

Tuleyev: Powerful, Popular and Flexible

¶3. (C) United Russia leaders at the City and Oblast Councils of People's Deputies, and even the local representative from the Communist Party insisted that Tuleyev enjoyed the vast public support suggested by the returns for United Russia on December 2. Dmitriy Shagiakhmetov, Editor of the independent Nasha Gazeta newspaper, disagreed and alleged that elements in the oblast government had falsified the December election results in an effort to "overfulfill the plan" for the Kremlin's party. However, even without falsification, he

admitted United Russia easily received more than 50 percent of the vote in the oblast.

¶14. (C) Our contacts said Tuleyev's success in concentrating power in his office and his prominent public image presaged Putin's cult of personality. Shagiakhmetov gave Tuleyev credit for skillfully adapting to political necessity. In 1997, Tuleyev had cast his lot with Boris Yeltsin, who appointed him to the then-vacant post of governor. In 2005, Tuleyev abandoned the Communist Party for United Russia and was again rewarded when Putin nominated him for another term.

Recently, Tuleyev has courted Medvedev by whole-heartedly supporting the national projects that Putin's heir-apparent has shepherded since 2005. All contacts with whom we spoke considered him a successful and charismatic governor.

¶15. (C) Aleksandr Kurasov, Head of the Regional Executive Committee of United Russia, suggested that more people in the oblast cast their vote for United Russia in the State Duma elections on December 2 because Tuleyev headed the local list than because Putin headed the national list. Kurasov used the same argument to explain why United Russia received a substantially larger percentage in Kemerovo in neighboring regions. He also provided a standard critique of the other parties in the Duma: Zhirinovskiy's LDPR and the Communist Party talk, he said, while United Russia delivers. He felt that even with a minority position in the State Duma and the Kemerovo Council of People's Deputies, LDPR and the Communist Party could affect the outcomes of national and local projects. However, he said they offer no alternative to "Plan Putin."

¶16. (C) Yelena Surikova, Editor in Chief of the Sibirskaya Voskresnaya Gazeta, likened the administration in Kemerovo to the national government: the governor closely controls political and economic activity in the oblast. Kemerovo's media, like the national media, have been closely controlled by the administration, although her newspaper, along with its sister-paper Nasha Gazeta, provide an independent point of view. Finally, she noted that the regional administration runs a tight ship with little or no public discussion of important political questions.

¶17. (C) Sergey Birukov, a professor of regional political science at Kemerovo State University, said that the governor dominates all spheres of politics in Kemerovo but added that the people seemed to like this dominance. Over the past ten years, the oblast has experienced stability and economic growth like much of the rest of Russia. According to him, the voters are reluctant to disrupt the status quo. Recent electoral successes were less an endorsement of the governor or Putin but more a vote for continued prosperity.

No Serious Opposition To Tuleyev...

¶18. (C) Viktor Artemov, leader of the local Communist Party and member of the Kemerovo City Council of People's Deputies, in a February 14 conversation was more enthusiastic about Tuleyev than about Communist Party Chairman Zyuganov. Zyuganov had antagonized the governor while the Communist Party in the region had worked well with Tuleyev in developing social programs, improving roads and enhancing veterans' benefits. The Communist Party's "shouting and complaining," not fraud, had won it scant support in December.

...But Quiet Unease With His Rule

¶19. (C) Shagiakhmetov noted, however, the downsides of Tuleyev's grip on the region. The officials in Tuleyev's administration "don't love him (the governor)" and talk ill of him behind his back, but they all depend on him for their positions. According to Shagiakhmetov, Tuleyev had gone through three deputies in the past five years. He suggested that these deputies were not incompetent or inexperienced but had begun to oppose the governor's priorities or policies --

a situation the governor could not abide. The personalities at the top of the political and party organizations have reached and maintained their positions because they have been able to adapt to changing political winds and have supported the governor whatever the weather.

¶110. (C) In the present environment, Shagiakhmetov saw little chance that an opposition would emerge. After so many years in power and such firm control of the government institutions and the media, Tuleyev had created a very potent public image of himself as a providing father. Shagiakhmetov dismissed the "opposition" Communist Party, saying that the local branch often supports Tuleyev's administration. He also dismissed the image of an effective administration presented in the local press. Efforts to increase the housing stock and improvements in health care were window dressing. In the areas of worker safety (a pressing problem in the nearby coal mines) and economic diversification, the oblast administration had not developed any effective initiatives.

National Projects Trump Local Issues

¶111. (C) Tuleyev has skillfully curried favor with the Kremlin by enthusiastically supporting Medvedev's national projects, most notably "Affordable Housing." Many locals told us about the construction of Lesnaya Polyana, a new "satellite city" ten kilometers outside Kemerovo. The project will provide housing for 30,000 people. New residents took occupancy in September 2007. Medvedev has closely followed the progress at Lesnaya Polyana and even visited the site in the fall of 2007. Faina Konstantinova, Chairperson of the Kemerovo Oblast Council of Peoples' Deputies, highlighted this development as one of the reasons for Tuleyev's and Medvedev's popularity. Shagiakhmetov dampened enthusiasm for this project claiming, it had been built as a showcase for Medvedev's affordable housing project and was not an adequate response to the problem of affordable housing.

¶112. (C) In contrast to this high-visibility project, both Shagiakhmetov and Birukov noted that serious local issues are often left by the wayside. In particular they noted that much talk was heard about mine safety after several coal mine accidents; however, neither saw much progress on the issue. On March 19, 2007, 110 miners died in a methane blast at the Ulyanovskaya coal mine in Kemerovo. On May 24, 2007, an additional 39 miners died in a similar accident at another Kemerovo mine. In our discussions with Kemerovo Oblast and City officials, however, none mentioned mine safety or worker safety as a particular concern or problem.

Comment

¶113. (C) Our Kemerovo interlocutors described for us an Oblast governor whose popularity and grip on power rivals Putin's. Tuleyev's potent public image and the prosperity of the region explain in part the December election results and the continued support for United Russia. The governor has skillfully used the Lesnaya Polyana project to gain favor with the Kremlin and to tie his future to Medvedev's. Yet Tuleyev's focus on his own future means that important local issues such as mine safety do not receive the attention they deserve and that money is instead diverted to show projects like Lesnaya Polyana.

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